TWO FANTASTIC VISIONS: FRANZ KAFKA AND ALFRED KUBIN

PHILIP H. RHEIN
Vanderbilt University

The association of Franz Kafka and Alfred Kubin took place in the real world of Prague in the early years of the twentieth century.[1] Kafka's diaries frequently mention his encounters with Kubin, and it is a known fact that Kubin was sufficiently fascinated by the Kafka vision of the world that he illustrated Kafka's short story, *The Country Doctor*.[2] Yet, as intriguing as the meetings of the two men in the world of reality may be, it is their ideological and technical association in the world of illusion and fantasy that is particularly interesting to analyze and compare.

Now no one doubts the contrasting impact of verbal and visual images. Ever since Lessing's critical proclamation on the division of arts, it has been generally accepted that the dynamics of prose depend primarily upon the extended experience of events in a linear fashion, whereas painting, because of its fixed, spatial orientation, produces a simultaneity of experience. Although this is an acceptable and logical division of the arts, many contemporary writers, aware of the impossibility of denying the time duration demanded by narration, have nonetheless attempted to manipulate language and verbal images in such a way that a succession of moments, experienced in a temporal sequence, becomes fused into a single perceived image within the mind of the reader. Just as the painter uses perspective in order to extend and manipulate the space into which the picture plane locks him, the contemporary writer applies a variety of technical maneuvers in an attempt to overcome the temporal sequence to which language confines him. The techniques vary from artist to artist and depend upon the unique way a particular writer perceives the world and seeks to effect his vision upon his reader.

It is with these comments in mind that one can begin to approach a comparison of Kafka and Kubin from the ideological and technical points of view. For the purpose of comparison, the following comments are specifically directed to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Kubin's *The Painter*. Ideologically, these two men belonged to that generation of artists who at the beginning of the twentieth century had to build anew the essential framework of the world. It is specifically in this building of framework, or of providing a form for the chaotic world of this time, that their art meets and that the point of comparison is established. Unwilling to accept the role delegated to man by the new world of technology,

Kafka and Kubin sought to break through the heaviness and the limitations of this world into a world that did not follow the rational logic of everyday life and science. To them, the irrational and often arbitrary world of the emotionally experienced inner sequences of ideas, people, and situations was the real world which mirrored the anxieties and beauties of life. Imagination, and not hard-core observation, became the means of perceiving reality for Kafka and Kubin; and it is from this point of view that their works must be critically analyzed. Blurring the edges of the seen world by reference to other worlds, these artists moved from the nineteenth-century preoccupation with natural appearances to an analysis of the subjective world; and, as paradoxical as it may seem, this subjective, visionary world expresses an order as real, if not as tangible, as any physical phenomena could ever be.

Everyone is familiar enough with the uniqueness of the Kafka and Kubin world, a world from which the reader or viewer is often alienated by fantastic objects and events. Logic as we ordinarily speak of it has no meaning in this world that lies beyond the limits of man's workaday experience, if not beyond man's understanding. It is not a fairy-tale world of dreams, but a world of dreams in which enough reality is retained that the reader or viewer is forced to acknowledge its familiarity. Gregor in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) or Death in Kubin's *The Painter* (1918) are obviously unreal figures in the ordinary world; yet both are treated in terms of the clearest, most concise logic. They *are*. The logical treatment of the unreal, so obvious in these instances, is true for all of Kafka's writings and Kubin's drawings. Once the original situation is accepted, the dénouement follows in the most logical manner.

The world as revealed by Kafka and Kubin is a product of their personal, inner experience; and because of their persistent preoccupation with the details and clutter of the real world, we are forced to be concerned with the living, the human, and the real in an apparently unreal situation. This emphasis upon detail is most significant when we are aware of the economy of expression employed by both artists. Nowhere are we bogged down under a torrent of needless verbal or visual description. The minutiae of the real world are retained as a point of contact between our reality and the suprareality of the art products and as an environmental backdrop to unreal or strange characters who are misfits in an otherwise fluid situation. The reader or viewer is constantly tossed between the extremes of reality and unreality which are on the point of meeting but never meet.

On one level, Kafka's and Kubin's works express keen psychological observation and social criticism; but beneath this surface

level, they seek to shape a metaphysical experience through which a man may find his freedom from time and actuality. They do not pretend that modern life is beautiful and humane; their intent is quite different. They do not seek to resolve man's social problems but rather to release man from them so that he can attain a level of understanding that transcends the imposed limits of time and space.

This world that they create is an abstract world: not abstract in the way that science is abstract, but abstract in that it deals only with the essential. Here the personal problem no longer exists, and that which seems still personal, is the very moment it is uttered, dissolved into the realm of myth. Kafka and Kubin succeed in projecting the personal problems of the individual into the realm of the universal problems of men. In a work by either of the men, the initially private problem of the piece is extended and modified until it no longer exists on the purely personal level. By means of the artist's selection and manipulation of material, the personal evolves into the suprapersonal, and the problems of the individual are superseded by the problems of man. Camus, in writing about Kafka, stated that, "His work is universal to the extent to which it represents the emotionally moving face of man fleeing humanity, deriving from his contradictions reasons for believing, reasons for hoping from his fecund despair and calling life his terrifying apprenticeship in death."[3] Camus' statement is equally applicable to the art of Kubin.

As we move from the ideological world that frames the works of Kafka and Kubin into the particular world that is locked within that frame, we enter a world of language and line that is systematically ordered and controlled with absolute precision. In *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka and *The Painter* by Kubin, the ideological similarities of the two artists are underscored by the selection and arrangement of details that serve to guide the reader or viewer of these works. To begin at the beginning, the titles themselves invite speculation. Just as the transformation of the commercial traveler Gregor Samsa is completed in the first sentence of the Kafka story, so too is the death of the painter an obvious and immediately conveyed visual fact of Kubin's pencil drawing. Gregor's metamorphosis and the painter's death are the unquestionable givens of the two art products, and these facts are never doubted by the reader or viewer. Unlike the pattern of traditional analytic tragedy in which the questions of guilt and innocence are raised and resolved, these questions are never addressed by either Kafka or Kubin. Paradoxically, however, these same questions become the central concern of the reader or viewer as he seeks to untangle the meaning of the presented details. The initial problem is further complicated

by an additional given fact. The ambiguity of the titles emphasizes the impossibility of any facile interpretation of either the story or the drawing. Obviously, the metamorphosis of Gregor and the death of the painter are accomplished acts; however, the title of the Kafka story might apply to Gregor's sister, Grete, with more justification than to Gregor himself, for it is, after all, her metamorphosis that is revealed in the unfolding of the narrative. The title of the Kubin drawing is equally ambiguous. On first glance, the painter of the title seemingly refers to the lifeless human form that lies before the canvas; yet the linear arrangement of details within the drawing quickly moves the viewer's eyes to the central figure of death, here portrayed with an artist's palette in his hand, completing the as yet unfinished canvas. Death is the focal point of the drawing; and he, like Grete in *The Metamorphosis,* is the figure we witness acting out the drama of the composition.

The movement inherent within the two art works is also comparable. The Kafka or Kubin character is brought into the conflict between the world of everyday life and the world of supernatural anxiety. As he moves more deeply into this conflict, no problem is resolved; everything begins over and over again. He attempts to capture meaning through what negates that meaning, but he is constantly thrown back upon himself, upon the one thing that has no definition. He is caught in the circular movement of a whirlpool that inevitably sucks him under. This circular movement is emphasized in *The Metamorphosis* by Gregor's perpetual motion that never budges him from the spot. The circle that forms the frame of the story by enclosing the action between two metamorphoses is repeated internally in several ways. In the first part of *The Metamorphosis,* the constant ticking of the alarm clock symbolically reflects the irrevocable circle of Gregor's past life as a traveling salesman, locked into the world of clock time. Later in the story, when specific time no longer has any meaning in Gregor's world, the alarm clock disappears and is replaced by Gregor's own ceaseless, atemporal, circular movement that binds him within a world that is no longer understood or measured realistically. Finally, Gregor's aimless circular wanderings are halted by the round apples that are embedded in his hard shell. Through Gregor's death, temporal order is restored, the shapeless vagueness that permeates the story is eradicated and the circle of the metamorphoses is completed.

The movement in Kubin's drawing, like that within *The Metamorphosis,* is circular. The horizontal line of the diagonally stretched out body of the painter leads us visually into the drawing, past the vertical lines of the mounted canvas and finally to the figure of Death in front of it. This movement carries us rapidly

from the world of reality to the world of the fantastic, from a dead human form to the symbol of death, from the temporal to the atemporal world. The central figure of Death is psychologically so overwhelming that it momentarily freezes visual movement. In much the same way that the rapid flow of time in the first part of *The Metamorphosis* is stopped in the second part in order to fix the reader's attention upon the meaning of the tale, here visual movement is halted so that the viewer will confront Death and accept his position as central to the artistic and the life processes. However, in order to return the viewer to the temporal, real world, Kubin carries the viewer's gaze away from the figure of Death to the easel behind him. This visual movement is accomplished by the repetition of line. Behind the easel, an outline of a stove is sketched, and the curved pipe of this stove repeats the composition on the canvas and the bent posture of Death. The visual movement consequently proceeds from the dead painter to the figure of Death to the canvas to the stove and once again back to the canvas, to Death, and finally to the dead figure. To express the same idea another way, the movement flows from the temporal to the atemporal to the temporal. This circular movement is reinforced by the circular shape of the stove cover, Death's hat, the palette he holds, the electric light above him, and finally in the curved arm of the dead painter. Each of these details powerfully contributes to the excitement and vibrancy of the drawing, and each of them visually repeats the movement of the entire composition. As we experience the drawing, we move from the specific, corporal world—conveyed by the body of the artist, the stove, the electric light—into the realm of the enigmatic, unreal world conveyed by the figure of Death. Just as the two worlds are joined in the third part of *The Metamorphosis* to convey the essentiality of each to meaningful, human existence, these same two worlds are visually combined in the drawing to portray the one world of man. The impact of both is that of a never-ending circle, of an unresolved questioning.

Perhaps questioning is the point. Kafka and Kubin were both absorbed in the realm of ideas, and the ideas that they sought to convey were given verbal and graphic form in such a way that the details the art products contain repeat the rhythm of a world in which good and evil, beauty and ugliness, life and death, the real and the unreal not only depend upon one another for meaning, but are ultimately perceived as inseparably fused. Their art seeks to capture the indivisible essence of reality; and for them, evil, decay, and death are never "the other side" of a divisible world, but are individual parts of a world that must be accepted in its totality.

NOTES

1. *The Diaries of Frank Kafka,* 1910-1913, 1914-1934, ed. Max Brod (N. Y.: Schocken Books, 1948, 1949).

2. Paul Raabe, *Alfred Kubin: Leben, Werk, Wirkung* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957), p. 207.

3. Albert Camus, "L'Espoir et l'absurde dans l'oeuvre de Franz Kafka," in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 137.

